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**TITLE:**

**‘Peacekeepers’ and ‘machine factories’: tracing Graduate Teaching Assistant subjectivity in a neoliberalised university**

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## **‘Peacekeepers’ and ‘machine factories’: tracing Graduate Teaching Assistant subjectivity in a neoliberalised university**

### **Abstract**

Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation, this article explores Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experiences of their work and subjectivity in a neoliberalised higher education environment. By drawing on a research project with GTAs from one UK university the article argues that GTA work is increasingly shaped by neoliberal reforms. The GTAs interviewed are critical of internationalisation, marketisation and client culture, and see these processes as acting on their subjectivity. The GTAs position themselves as mediators between demanding students and overworked academics: they have turned into much needed ‘peacekeepers’ and ‘machine factories’. The findings also demonstrate that the subjectivity enforced by a dominant market ideology is further negotiated in the GTA experience. The discourses reveal that a lack of institutional control and coordination of graduate teaching provides, and indeed enables the GTAs to express some but often limited discontent with neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Graduate Teaching Assistants, neoliberalism, subjectification, Foucault

**Word count:** 7990

### **Setting a scene**

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are postgraduate students who teach part-time, on a paid basis, whilst also being research students at the university level, usually obtaining a doctoral degree, but in some cases also Master of Philosophy or Master of Research degrees (Chadha 2013; Winstone and Moore 2016). While employing graduate students to teach is not new in the UK, the growing scale on which it is now happening has drawn increasing attention (Park and Ramos 2002). While statistical data on GTA employment is unavailable, possibly due to temporary nature of the work, the University College Union (UCU)<sup>1</sup> has problematised the casualisation of academic work. It argues that 54% of all academic staff in the UK work in precarious conditions, e.g. they have short-term contracts and/or they are paid by the hour (UCU 2016a). It is particularly likely that most undergraduate teaching is carried out by staff with insecure contracts, including a high number of GTAs (UCU 2016a). Furthermore, recent media outputs have revealed that GTA pay and roles are diverse across the UK, and many GTAs feel being exploited in their universities. Else (2014) notes in the *Times Higher Education* that pay

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<sup>1</sup> The University and College Union is the main trade union of the higher, further and adult education professionals in the UK (UCU 2017a).

for GTAs across the UK varies from less than £10 per hour at some universities to more than £40 an hour at others. Furthermore, the *Academics Anonymous*<sup>2</sup> page in the Guardian, a British daily newspaper, has created a safe place for GTAs and academics to share their work experiences in the UK universities. One anonymous GTA and a doctoral student from English Literature explains how the provision of teaching opportunities is ‘a mystery’ in their university:

At the Russell Group<sup>3</sup> university where I study, the allocation of teaching remains a mystery. We aren’t told how or why teaching hours are assigned. These simply drop like falling stars on the luckiest among us. No list of teaching opportunities is made available, and GTAs are often excluded from the discussion meetings that pair students with courses. There is no transparency in the process – you simply email a note of interest in teaching, and pray for favour. (Academics Anonymous 2014)

While some struggle to secure teaching opportunities, others might feel enforced to accept the offers:

One postdoctoral fellow who recently left Oxbridge for a lectureship elsewhere told me his academic mentor “brazenly” delegated her work to him, work which was time-consuming, administrative and an inconvenience to her. He said he was “undoubtedly exploited” during the fellowship, but at the time he was in no position to refuse. For him, with a good reference at stake, the sacrifice paid off in the end. (Academics Anonymous 2014)

The author’s experiences as a former GTA in one UK university confirm the tensions characterising the role. I am familiar with the diverse conditions under which the GTAs work. I also empathise with insecurities they face in terms of acting as hourly paid teaching staff with often very high workload and low payment. My experience of pressures conflicted with a similar hope that unpaid work will lead to employment.

As a response to casualisation of academic work, the UCU has undertaken a number of initiatives such as the annual ‘Stamp out casual contracts’ day, sending letters of concern to

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<sup>2</sup> The Academics Anonymous page is available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/series/academics-anonymous>

<sup>3</sup> The Russell Group includes 24 UK universities ‘which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector’ (Russell Group 2015).

universities, and forming an anti-casualisation committee (UCU 2017b). The UCU has also highlighted some recent wins for GTAs such as the 20% pay rise at King's College London and higher transparency of GTA recruitment and payment at Essex University (see UCU 2016b). While the practices of the GTA work in the UK receive increasing media and trade union attention, academic research in the field is in its early stages (Muzaka 2009). This small-scale study aims to contribute to a much needed academic discussion on graduate teaching, and it includes focus groups with nine GTAs from one Russell Group university in the UK. Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation of the subject and Faircloughian discourse analysis, this study traces the ways in which the GTAs interviewed experience their work and subjectivity in one UK university. The concept of the GTA as 'a subject' in this article will refer firstly to the individual as being 'a subject to someone else by control and dependence', and secondly, as being tied to '[their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1982, 331). This means that for Foucault (1983, 372) the subjectivities are shaped by power relations that exist in complex relations: 'in the networks of social'. This article starts with an exploration of the higher education context within which the GTAs work, followed by a theoretical framework and the discussion of research findings.

### **GTAs and neoliberalisation of academic work**

This article suggests that GTA work in most UK universities is increasingly shaped by neoliberal policy reforms. As I have argued elsewhere (Raaper 2016), I understand neoliberalism as a specific mode of government that is rooted in economic discourses of competition. Furthermore, neoliberalism could be seen as a form of late-capitalism (Bansel 2015) influenced by the Western public policy context of the 1980s, particularly the governments of Thatcher and Reagan that promoted free trade, marketisation and the reduction of public welfare systems (Peters 2012). These economic and political discourses have altered the public sector by promoting a view of citizens as consumers, welfare rights as consumer rights, and commercialisation and privatisation as common practices for reorganising the sector (Peters 2012). Within this neoliberal context, universities are pressured to change: they need to improve their 'educational products', respond to markets and increase their competitiveness (Jankowski and Provezis 2014, 477). Universities therefore experience a wide range of tensions related to staff research time, increasing student numbers, rising student expectations and competition between the universities (Park 2002), which are further enforced by public funding cuts to UK higher education over the few decades.

Recent research on academic work has increasingly problematised the neoliberalisation of universities and its negative impact on academics (see Gill 2014; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Heijstra et al. 2016; Leathwood and Read 2013). For example, Gill (2014) critiques the culture of performativity where metrics such as grant income, research outputs and student satisfaction are used to measure academic success. Within this context, stress and working ever-longer hours have turned into a new normality in academia (Archer 2008), causing physical and mental illness among academics (Gill and Donaghue 2016). Gill (2014, 20) even describes academics as ‘a profession stretched to breaking point’. While precariousness rather than security has become characteristic of all academic life, it is particularly affecting early career academics (Gill 2013; Gill 2014; Gill and Donaghue 2016). It is common that early career staff work on short-term and/or hourly paid positions (Gill and Donaghue 2016), while constantly looking for their next role (Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Heijstra et al. (2016, 7) also note that early career academics need to ‘shine on all fronts of the profession’ to demonstrate their dedication to academia. It is also likely that teaching is disproportionally carried out by younger (and often female) colleagues, creating a tension between teaching and research expectations (Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Early career academics are therefore highly vulnerable to exploitation: they need to cope with high teaching loads while competing for the (prospect of) full-time work (Natanel 2017). The UCU (2016a, 3) has even started to describe a ‘typical’ academic career progress as being precarious:

A typical academic career trajectory, for example, involves moving from hourly-paid teaching as part of a PhD to hourly-paid teaching as substantive employment, often with another university, with possible fixed-term contracts afterwards. For many academics, this is where the road ends. They have to accept a lifetime of precariousness as they piece together short-term contracts, or look for employment elsewhere.

Interestingly, however, research on casualisation of academic profession tends to overlook the GTA experiences of neoliberalism. Many of the casual staff in the UK universities are doctoral students, reflecting a situation where the employment of GTAs is related to a need to reconcile rising student numbers with pressure on universities and academic staff (Park 2002). In other words, while all academic staff are expected to produce high quality research in a context where student-staff ratio has significantly increased and funding reduced, GTAs have turned into ‘a much needed and valued function as substitute teachers’ (Chadha 2013, 206). However, it is also important to note that recent policy developments in the UK could challenge the employment of GTAs. The Higher Education White Paper underpinning the newly approved

Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (see DfBIS 2016) problematises the primary focus on research quality in English universities, and describes teaching as ‘the poor cousin of research’ that needs to be reformed:

For too long, we have funded teaching on the basis of quantity, not quality. This is in sharp contrast to research, with its quality-driven funding stream allocated through the Research Excellence Framework. This has led to teaching being the poor cousin of research in significant parts of English higher education. (DfBIS 2016, 43)

It could be that the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)<sup>4</sup> makes PhD students less employable as teachers. Their lower qualifications and teaching experience could damage the institutional teaching excellence rating and thereby make universities less competitive in a higher education market. It might even encourage further separation of teaching and research roles, where highly qualified teaching fellows are responsible for ensuring excellent teaching ratings.

In the current context where research is given priority, however, the GTA role can be described as being problematic in terms of identity, status and responsibility (Fairbrother 2012). Park (2002, 51) argues that GTAs are often made to ‘carry heavy burdens’ with often ‘a very muted voice’. Rather than colleagues, they are seen as a solution to ever increasing teaching loads. Park and Ramos (2002, 52) argue, based on their case study at Lancaster University (UK), that GTAs have a very little autonomy to innovate in their teaching; they are simply ‘carrying out the job’ with a lack of ownership or engagement. Similar findings are confirmed by Muzaka (2009) who based on his survey at the University of Sheffield (UK) explains that GTAs lack a sense of authority over course content, organisation and delivery. It is therefore unsurprising that many GTAs feel like ‘academic workhorses’ or ‘donkeys in the department’ due to their heavy workload and limited collegiality and autonomy (Park and Ramos 2002, 47). Furthermore, Fairbrother (2012) explains that GTAs can be increasingly vulnerable to exploitation, both in terms of their present and future career prospects:

...it must be acknowledged that in maximising the potential of the role, GTAs risk exploitation both in the present (teaching workloads may not reflect payment and may detract from core research work) and the future (the continued prestige of research

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<sup>4</sup> TEF includes a number of mechanisms, allowing the UK government to monitor and assess teaching quality in English universities. It aims to incentivise teaching quality and to create a link between the TEF ratings and tuition fees (see DfBIS 2016).

output in terms of papers over teaching experience may hamper progression in academia). (Fairbrother 2012, 357)

I would also argue that by undertaking teaching work, the GTAs might actually enforce the system that promotes precarious academic contracts rather than full-time employment of new academic staff. According to several authors (e.g. Muzaka 2009; Park 2002), there are also micro tensions characterising GTA work and roles. For example, GTAs hold multiple roles – they are teachers, researchers, students and employees – and tensions are associated with these roles (Muzaka 2009). Students typically view GTAs as teachers, but departments often approach them as teaching assistants and graduate students (Park 2002). GTAs themselves, however, tend to identify with both: being a student and a teacher (Cho et al. 2011; Dotger 2011). They therefore occupy an ambiguous role: they are neither ‘fish nor fowl’ as Park (2002, 51) figuratively explains it.

### **Foucauldian theorisation of the subject**

This article is guided by a Foucauldian (1982) theorisation of the subject. For Foucault, there are no ‘universal necessities in human nature’, only various technologies through which the individual subject is created or creates him/herself (Besley and Peters 2007, 6). This also means that the subject for Foucault (1984) is not a substance but a form that differs in various situations depending on the type of relationship the subject establishes with the social context and to oneself. In other words, the GTA as a subject is in a constant process of being produced (Butler 1997). Subjectivity is shaped by neoliberal reforms taking place in higher education but also by the meanings that GTAs assign to their teaching work. Subjectification – becoming a subject (Lehn-Christiansen 2011) – is therefore an inescapable process taking place in all parts of human life. The subject is social in its very essence, and any exploration aiming to trace the subjectification processes needs to start with the presumption of a constitutive sociality (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Like academics who are increasingly enforced to become ‘enterprising, highly productive, competitive, always available and able to withstand precarity’ (The Res-Sisters 2017, 268), it could be expected that GTAs as ‘academics in the making’ are shaped by compulsory resilience. Gill (2013) even argues that neoliberalism has found ‘a fertile ground’ in academia, as individuals’ readiness to work hard and achieve success aligns well with neoliberal expectations (Gill 2013). Early career academics can often view themselves as better able to cope with high tempo and competition in universities as they have never experienced a less pressurised university environment to work in (Archer 2008). It could therefore be expected



that contemporary GTA subjectivity does not exist in isolation but relates to the context of contemporary academia.

Foucault's later work on governmentality explored the ways in which human beings evolve as subjects (Foucault 1982), and how individuals can resist power acting on them and develop what he called the practices of the self (Allan 2013). Foucault (1982, 331) started to explain the concept of the subject as having two meanings: 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'. By drawing on a Foucauldian theorisation, this article does not approach GTAs as utterly passive individuals but like 'late-Foucault' it recognises that GTAs must have some opportunities to negotiate their subjectivity. According to Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000), thought and critique are the key processes that help to negotiate one's subjectivity. However, it is also known that self-governance enforced by neoliberalism makes it difficult to think freely (Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Individuals start accepting the pressures as being normal or view these in relation to their own personal responsibility, making the oppositional response unlikely. Newcomers in particular, need to prove themselves worthy rather than critical of the profession (Heijstra et al. 2016). While overt resistance is unlikely among GTAs, Winstone and Moore (2016) argue that it is liminality of GTA status – being neither fully a student nor teacher - that enables GTAs to negotiate their identity in various situations. By conducting a detailed discourse analysis of the focus group data, this article aims to shed some light on the ways in which the GTA work is understood and subjectivity formed in one UK university.

### **Discourse analysis**

A Foucauldian approach to discourse reflects a postmodern concern with how language produces not only meanings but particular subjects (Graham 2011). Like many authors (e.g. Diaz-Bone et al. 2008; Graham 2011), I argue that a Foucauldian discourse analysis is not a fixed analytic framework but requires adaptations. For the purposes of this study, I have found further guidance from Fairclough's (1992, 2001) approach to discourse analysis. Similarly to Foucault, Fairclough (1992) explains discourse as a form of social practice, which constitutes social entities, relations and subjects. This means that Fairclough's (2001) critical discourse analysis is a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social processes. The major contrast between the two authors relates to the concept of ideology in Fairclough's work. Poole (2010) even criticises him as being too ideological in

terms of anti-neoliberalism. For example, Fairclough (2001) explains that all national and local discourses need to be interpreted in the context of global processes, particularly of neoliberalism that is affecting most Western countries. It could therefore be argued that Fairclough has enriched discourse analysis with a neoliberal critique that characterises post-Foucault world. As this project explores GTA subjectivity in a neoliberal context, it benefits from a more ideological take on discourse. By applying Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, each discursive artefact was analysed as follows:

- (1) a text by describing its vocabulary, metaphors, grammar, textual structures;
- (2) a discursive practice by analysing the situational context of text production and intertextual discourses;
- (3) a social practice by tracing the social determinants influencing the discourse, key statements and possible effects of the statements.

These analytic stages were applied to deconstruct the GTA discourses and to trace the Foucauldian processes of power and subjectification. Such analysis recognises a connection between the micro and macro levels, and it operationalises the socially constitutive properties of discourse that Foucault was in favour of (Dremel and Matic 2014). The findings presented in this article are therefore structured based on a Foucauldian perspective to the subject. They start by exploring the GTAs' experiences of wider higher education context – neoliberalisation in particular – and move towards the micro experiences of subjectification. The discursive complexity, however, will be emphasised throughout the analysis.

The discourses were created by conducting two focus groups with GTAs from one Russell Group university in the UK (hereafter: the University). Like other UK universities, it is influenced by various accountability measures (e.g. Research Excellence Framework, National Student Survey, university rankings) and business aspirations (e.g. participation in internationalisation higher education markets) characteristic of a neoliberal higher education setting. As regards structure, it has four academic units in disciplinary areas of Arts (A), Social Sciences (Soc Sci), Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences (MVLS), and Science and Engineering (S&E).

The sample was formed by purposive and snowball sampling techniques, and it included nine GTAs from four colleges. Focus group participants were self-recruited via mailing lists; in some

cases, participants also recommended further GTAs to this study. All are doctoral students (except Rebecca who is a Master's student) who are involved in teaching and assessment at UG level; in some cases they also teach at PG study level. The study was approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, and the research participants were aware of their voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity. The quotes presented in this article have been de-identified by using pseudonyms, and further codes include a reference to disciplinary areas.

### **A sense of change: university as neoliberalised**

The ways in which the GTAs describe the University – particularly in terms of increasing financial pressures, internationalisation and client culture - provide a first insight into the participants' experiences of a neoliberalised context in which they work. This is what Barnett (2011) would describe as an entrepreneurial university setting, shaped by marketisation. A vivid example of financial pressures and business aspirations characteristic of the University is provided by Allison:

*It's becoming business-like, so you hear both as students and staff, you hear more and more about what departments or what courses are financially lucrative and what not, and you hear about the cuts and all that. And it's run by economists as well. [...] It has got too many students and too few staff, and staff is overworked and underpaid. There is very little administrative support due to financial problems which students and staff both feel. (Allison, A)*

Allison (A) presents a division between the management of the university – 'economists' as she calls them - and the pressurised academic community. Some participants explain internationalisation as a way to solve the financial constraints. Maria (Soc Sci) argues that '*the School of Education [is] being very internationalised*'. She continues by saying, '*I think in a couple of years ago there were staff issues being cut down, and I think maybe this is one way to see if they can raise funds*'. Like Maria, who explains internationalisation in relation to financial aspirations, Jonathan (MVLS) argues, '*So I think there is a clear point of we don't have much funding, they are willing to pay, being...having international front looks good*'. From their perspective university education is being used for economic value, turning into 'a product and process specifically for its "exchange" rather than for its intrinsic "use" value' (Naidoo and Williams 2015, 212). It is unclear though, what the participants perceive to be the cause of financial problems in the University. While the public funding cuts have affected the UK

universities for decades, the universities have also increased their spending on marketing and student recruitment (Clarke 2014; Matthews 2013). Similarly, the pay for the UK vice-chancellors has rapidly increased, rising up to a total cost of £593 000 in some universities in academic year 2014-2015 (Grove 2016).

Furthermore, the participants spoke about a shift towards emerging client culture in the University and in higher education more broadly. Jonathan (MVLS) argues that *'there is a focus on teaching in terms of trying to keep the students satisfied, so they will give you good rankings'*. Universities thereby become *'afraid of the students'* as clients who can affect their excellent ratings:

*I think that this payment, you know, client service is something that I find very frustrating especially in unis, and I'm not only talking about [the University], who are trying to improve the rankings because you will end up being afraid of the students saying something bad about the uni, even if the student saying it just because they weren't doing the work they were supposed to do... (Jonathan, MVLS)*

Similarly, Sarah (Soc Sci) argues that the client culture has become prevalent among students she teaches. She explains that *'we're probably less harsh with the marking of students who are paying'* (Sarah). Rebecca (S&E) shares similar views and argues that the attitudes such as *'I am paying 14 grand a year to be here, you know, I deserve whatever'* are common among the students. The reflections above support what Patsarika (2014, 527) vividly describes as the 'the portrait' of students being 'coloured' by neoliberal developments: students are turning into consumers. Pritchard (2005) argues that policy discourses position students as consumers who can choose higher education institutions based on league tables of student satisfaction and research quality. As an expected consequence of consumerism, universities become knowledge (and experience) suppliers to students (Svensson and Wood 2007). Like many scholars in the field (e.g. Naidoo and Williams 2015; Peters and Olssen 2005), the GTAs are concerned about the neoliberalisation of higher education and the impact internationalisation and consumerism can have on the traditional value of higher education as a public good. Daniel introduces a term *'neoliberal education establishment'* to express his concerns:

*There is something about the neoliberal education establishment in neoliberal society in general if we can speak of such a thing that poses away from what we are talking about in terms of the subject for its own sake and the importance of the learning. (Daniel, A)*

Similarly to Barnett (2011), the GTAs perceive their university as raising its market value rather than facilitating educational processes of learning and teaching.

### **Becoming a GTA**

In order to understand the ways in which the GTAs perceive themselves as teaching subjects in a neoliberalised university setting, their sense of expectations require attention:

*...I think very much we as PhD students, you are expected to be a GTA. (Amy, A)*

*...if you are in Master's, you are not expected to, but in your PhD, in your first and second year of PhD, you are expected to be a GTA. (Eric, Soc Sci)*

Furthermore, Eric argues that *'if you are not [a GTA], you have done something weird'*. While the discourses do not indicate who is pressurising the participants, the National Union of Students in the UK argues that most GTAs undertake the job to improve their employability (NUS 2013). The competition for full-time post-PhD jobs is high, and individuals need to become strategic about their career progress (Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Rebecca (S&E) reflects on GTAs' strategic approach by saying, *'the further up you go the PhD years, you get less and less people wanting to be involved in the teaching because they need to get the PhD work done'*. Furthermore, Regnö (2017) argues that early career staff on short-term contracts is highly dependent on senior academics in terms of job opportunities and references, making them likely to accept exploitative working conditions. Sarah demonstrates her dependency on academic colleagues in gaining teaching experience:

*I think it's actually really hard to get a GTA work in Education, particularly on the BEd degree because they want you to have been a teacher and usually they employ teachers to come in as tutors...but last year I managed to, I haven't been a teacher, but I managed to squeeze in, and do some teaching. [...] But again it's difficult and it depends very much on who you know here. (Sarah, Soc Sci)*

It also appears that some GTA opportunities arise from the workload pressures academics experience (Chadha 2013, Fitzmaurice 2013). For instance, Sarah (Soc Sci) brings an example from assessment work, *'I think in Education, people want to offload their marking because they don't have any time'*, and Rebecca (S&E) explains that *'when I got given the Master's stuff to mark, this was purely the case of offloading'*. She also indicates expectations of confidentiality: *'It was very much "Don't really tell anybody that you are doing this because the Master's*

*students will be upset if they find out that it's you, the ex-Master's student who has given them the feedback''*. The participants' experiences of becoming a GTA confirm the wider changes taking place in academic work. Gonzales, Martinez and Ordo (2013) argue that most academics face pressures regarding high workload and blurring borders between work and private life. Institutional pressures and shifting priorities in academic work create workload problems and stress among academics (Fanghanel 2012), and GTAs can provide a much needed solution to these pressures.

While there is nothing new about seeing graduate students as a solution to academic workload problems (see Muzaka 2009; Park 2002), the participants' discourses enable to understand the ways in which neoliberal pressures shape the GTA subjectivity. Rebecca, for instance, describes GTAs as 'peacekeepers' and 'machine factories' who need to mediate the neoliberal pressures universities face:

*...GTAs [are] acting a little bit like peacekeepers and a little bit like a machine factory, just to get everybody through. So especially with the labs, so I taught the same lab 21 times over three-week period, and it was a little bit like a factory turning out the same thing over and over and over again to students. (Rebecca, S&E)*

The example above demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of the subject who is fundamentally shaped by the social context s/he is part of (Foucault 1984). The idea of 'a machine factory' in particular might refer to Rebecca's experiences of how GTAs take care of increasing teaching loads in the University and make sure that they get all students 'through'. She appears to see herself filling a gap that makes the overall system work. Interestingly, she also refers to 'peacekeeping' which might refer to tensions between academic and student communities that need to be dealt with, and perhaps kept quiet as it became evident from her earlier reflection. Similar example is provided by Amy (A) who argues that she is 'a bit of a mediator between the lecturer and students sometimes in English language'. Rebecca also describes the GTAs in her department as 'the face of Psychology' or 'the frontline defence':

*...one of the things they [academics] tell us when we become GTAs is, because we have a completely different lab space for first and second years, completely sort of detached from the Psychology department, they would say, 'Oh, you are the face of Psychology for two years because you are the people that the students are actually going to talk to, they are not going to the member of staff, they are going to come to talk to you'. So you are a little bit of a mediator, you kind of feel like you have to know who students should*

*talk to, who is the best kind of members of staff to talk to for each problem and kind of mediate stuff [...] you are kind of like the frontline defence sort of.* (Rebecca, S&E)

The participants' discourses demonstrate a significant responsibility that the GTAs have in neoliberalised higher education settings: they not only teach a large number of students (Park 2002), but they have close interaction with students through pastoral care duties. It appears that neoliberal discourses provide 'a space of functioning' (Foucault 1972) for GTAs. In other words, they create expectations to become a GTA but also offer opportunities to succeed as one. Interestingly, however, there appears to be very little institutional coordination and support available for the GTAs to cope with their roles. While the University's website highlights the statutory nature of the GTA training, Amy (A) describes this training as '*a pretty much a tick in the box exercise*' and '*it just wasn't great*'. Furthermore, Rebecca argues that the statutory training is not compulsory for the GTAs in Psychology:

*...we don't go to the university-led GTA trainings. I know that there is a GTA training course, but we don't get sent to it...which seems quite strange, but the Psychology department thinks that actually what the university teaches on GTA training isn't what the GTA is in the Psychology department.* (Rebecca, S&E)

The lack of institutional support to GTAs is confirmed by Chadha (2013) who argues that GTA training is under-developed in the UK. The main reason might be the transitory nature of graduate teaching: departments do not find it financially lucrative to invest in comprehensive professional development programmes as GTA employment usually ends when they complete their research degrees (Muzaka 2009).

### **GTA response and negotiation of their subjectivity**

The participants described their role as being inconsistent across the University: '*what is expected of GTAs to be doing is inconsistent*' (Eric, Soc Sci), and '*I think our role as GTAs across the university is very inconsistent*' (Amy, A). This experience of inconsistency aligns with the issues highlighted in recent media outputs (see Else 2014). On the one hand, the lack of institutional coordination might be a problem for GTAs. Rebecca (S&E) explains how close interaction with students and pastoral care issues are like '*a ticking time bomb*' in her department: '*students have, you know, blown up at GTAs...so I think like, this is one of the things, you know, we don't really get any training on and is kind of like a ticking time bomb*'. On the other hand, inconsistency creates opportunity and makes GTAs relatively free to design

their interaction with students. Unlike academics who need to be concerned about producing excellent research and ensuring outstanding student satisfaction (Fitzmaurice 2013), GTAs can express discontent with neoliberalism and create their own counter discourse: that of pedagogical support, for example. Maria describes this pedagogical support as ‘*nurturing*’:

*...you’re nurturing, you’re looking at these people who are still in the learning process, and you’re saying, ‘I’m here to work with you, I’m here to help you’...* (Maria, Soc Sci)

Similar examples are provided by Sarah and Amy who explain their pedagogical support to students in assessment processes:

*I felt like I had to set them up for their essay and tell them what would be expected, and then kind of set them up for the ones who wouldn’t do well, tell them why, if they didn’t do well, this is why you weren’t doing well. I had a huge amount of responsibility and they were kind of relying on me...* (Sarah, Soc Sci)

*I’m kind of trying to support them and kind of set them up for potentially what they might be getting in assessment. And also saying to them, ‘So, you might not do so well here, you know, don’t worry because...’ you know, that kind of thing.* (Amy, A)

This discourse of pedagogical support helps GTAs to project some educational value to their work. It appears as the GTAs do not wish to be positioned in an instrumental (and economic) way characteristic of neoliberal universities. Furthermore, the examples tend to reflect the ways in which GTAs negotiate their subjectivity in a Foucauldian sense (1982): despite the institutional pressures, the GTAs still assign some pedagogical value to their role, particularly in terms of support they can offer to students. In other words, the GTA discourses demonstrate a Foucauldian understanding of power as ‘a game of freedom’ in which power can be exercised only so far as the subjects are free: free to choose actions within a field of possibilities (Dean 2013, 63). The GTAs are not only products of neoliberal reforms but are ‘tied to [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault 1982, 331). This, however, makes the GTAs emotionally vulnerable, causing further stress in their experience:

*I had a student to come in and like, you know, ‘My essay is due in late cause I had an abortion’. I’m like, this is not the information I want to have or I feel capable of handling.* (Rebecca, S&E)

O’Shea et al. (2015) explain that casual staff finds it often challenging to provide pastoral care to students, particularly due to workplace allocation (e.g. shared offices) and limited time that



is available to get to know students. The GTAs are aware of the time constraints in their work and even question whether they can afford caring for students in the longer term:

*I think the more you give students, so the more they want and that just sets up this huge expectation that you cannot live up to. (Jennifer, S&E)*

*I find frustrating the fact that it [writing feedback] is so time-consuming that I'm afraid at some point I just change the way I do it because you're just fed up with it. (Jonathan, MVLS)*

Furthermore, Amy argues that she knows GTAs who have taken a different approach, and see pastoral care as part of wider exploitative higher education system that needs to be resisted:

*I do know a couple of GTAs who, I mean rightly or wrongly, don't think that's [pastoral care] their responsibility. [...] if the student came to them with an issue, they are 'Oh, I'm not getting paid to that, I'm getting paid to teach a course or a module or whatever and that's it'. (Amy, A)*

The quotes above indicate that it is the institutional ambiguity around the GTA role that allows the participants to deviate from the dominant market ideology. The GTAs perceive themselves as not just substitute teachers helping out pressurised academics (Chadha 2013), but they want to nurture and support their students. However, this opportunity to practise pastoral care has its limitations, particularly as the process is time-consuming and often unpaid. In other words, the wider neoliberal 'walls of society' (Butler 1997, 74) dictate what counts as possible, making the GTAs consider their use of time.

### **Concluding thoughts**

This small-scale study sheds some light on how a group of GTAs from one prestigious UK university make sense of higher education reforms and perceive their subjectivity as being shaped by recent processes of internationalisation and marketisation. The participants explained their GTA work in relation to various forces and expectations such as promoting one's employability and career progress, networking with senior colleagues as well as helping pressurised academics with their workload. They identified GTAs with substitute teachers who are needed because academics are going through so called 'dark times' (Tamboukou 2012, 860). From this perspective, being a GTA is a pressurised experience: GTAs act as 'machine factories' and 'peacekeepers' who keep the higher education system going. These discourses

confirm the tensions highlighted in wider scholarly work on neoliberalism in higher education (see Naidoo and Williams 2015; Peters 2012), and make it possible to suggest that GTA subjectivity is shaped by the neoliberal changes in universities, particularly a need to teach increasing number of students with limited resources. Furthermore, the participants' discourses normalise the GTA work as being an expectation to 'academics in the making', confirming the wider scholarly discussion on early career academics and their precarious working conditions (Gill 2013; Gill 2014; Gill and Donaghue 2016). The close connection between the GTAs' understanding of themselves and the structural context of higher education provides an example of a subject who in Foucauldian terms is shaped by the social context s/he is part of (Foucault 1984). However, the findings also suggest that while the GTAs interviewed are influenced by neoliberal forces, they cannot be seen as utterly passive subjects. The GTAs interviewed make use of ambiguity around their work, and practise freedom by critiquing marketisation of higher education and caring for their students. Interestingly, however, their discourses of pastoral care compete with the issues of time and efficiency, making the participants question the possibility for 'nurturing' students.

While contributing to a much needed scholarly discussion on graduate teaching, this article has demonstrated that the GTAs in this particular university and possibly in many other institutions are brought into action to mediate the neoliberal pressures on academic staff. They also occupy an ambiguous space where the GTAs both conform to but also act against neoliberalism that has made the work of graduate teachers increasingly possible.

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